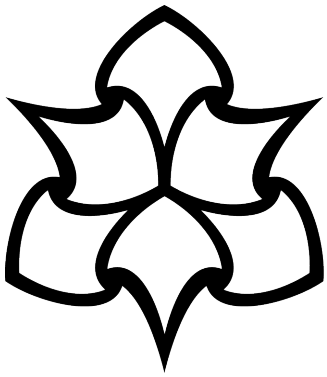

Bricoleurs Extraordinaire: Sports Coaches in Inter War Britain

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Introduction

Writing in the early twentieth century, educational theorist John Dewey argued that learning through doing is essential in enabling people to abandon their habits and think creatively. People learn from their experiences and by reflecting on those experiences since reflective thinking, an active, careful and constant reconsideration of beliefs and knowledge, leads to inquiry through a scientific method, a process of experimentation that results in the formulating and testing of theory (Dewey, 1902, 1933). Reflection is a rational and purposeful act and the reflective process, which mediates experience and knowledge, is triggered by professional issues or problems.[1] From Dewey's perspective, then, activities such as sports coaching involve a 'continuing reconstruction of experience', the rethinking and re-examining of concepts and experiences to deal with the demands of the present,[2] and, in that respect, coaches are active participants in their learning, continuously operating in a fluid, cyclical, and transactional manner within an ever-changing environment to redevelop their competencies.[3] This ongoing process is not domain specific. Winchester et al. suggested that knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights are developed from a coach's daily experiences, in sport, work and at home, as well as through exposure to the coaching environment while, for Jarvis, learning is a lifelong activity and coaches learn by extracting information from their social situations and transforming it into knowledge and/or skills. Every transformation results in a changed person who has become more experienced.

Contemporary research reinforces the importance of practical coaching experiences, combined with personal reflections on, and interpretations of, those experiences as significant factors in coach effectiveness. In reviewing related literature, Cushion et al noted that informal learning through coaching experience and engaging with other coaches remained the dominant mode of learning with 'expert' coaching practitioners favouring self-directed learning and reflection to support their experiential learning. When players become coaches, their methods remain heavily influenced by their playing experiences,[4] and they consistently identify other coaches, experimentation, and their own past experiences, as key reference points.[5] Skilled coaches still prioritise experience and networks over theory and formal education, reflecting the view of athletics coach Percy Cerutty that, 'The teachings of the coach must always be suspect when he attempts to develop techniques based upon theories worked out intellectually. Unless he gets the idea from personal experience, and feeling first, he is most likely to be wrong in principle.'

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[1] Gilbert and Jackson, 2004
[2] Vazir, 2006
[3] Burden, 2000
[4] Potrac, Jones, and Cushion, 2007
[5] Irwin, Hanton and Kerwin, 2007

These developmental preferences mean that coaches possess a largely implicit form of knowledge, closely connected to past experiences, which shares similarities with craft knowledge. While subscribing to Dewey's argument that experience is central to learning and that immediate reflection is required to enhance and shape that learning, Evans and Light observed that this learning is often unarticulated as abstract or tacit knowledge operating at a non-conscious level. Most tacit knowledge is difficult to codify and can never be made explicit or taught directly but must be learnt through experience.[6] As Polanyi pointed out, tacit knowledge, a form of know how or a 'knack' of doing something like sports coaching, involves the training of perception in such a way that the individual 'discovers by an effort of his own something that we could not tell him. And he knows it then in his turn but cannot tell it'. Informed guesses and hunches are part of exploratory acts, which suggests that people at times do not know what they do know or have learnt. In all historical periods, successful coaches have articulated the belief that they had a 'coaching eye', an innate intuition about how to improve athletes. In 1913, Mussabini referred to the 'discerning eye of the trainer' and half a century later, athletics coach Geoff Dyson commented that it was his 'coaching eye' that made him such an accomplished coach.

The Inter-War Years

History suggests that contemporary elite coaches fundamentally operate in ways that would be familiar to their Inter War predecessors. Their reliance on experience and intuition stimulated the creation of new ideas, concepts and methods, while socialization, trial-and-error or practice, provided a body of craft knowledge, a 'feel' for coaching founded on tacit knowledge.[7] These coaches never relied on academics or scientists but on 'organisational socialisation', whereby aspiring coaches acquired knowledge and skills, as well as absorbing the nuances of coaching practice, through years of involvement. Mussabini prepared training and racing schedules for 1920 double Olympic champion Albert Hill who then used his methods to coach Sydney Wooderson.[8] Harry Andrews drew on his family's expertise and years of working as a professional coach to assist athletes across a range of sports and, in 1918, Oxford University's first professional coach Alfred Shrubb used his own experiences with Andrews in his coaching of several Olympians. Cambridge University coach Alec Nelson and Bill Thomas, Shrubb's successor at Oxford, drew on their own experiences as amateur and professional athletes. Oral traditions were supplemented by an eclectic range of sources, including international travel, while practitioners also produced training manuals in which they distilled their experiential knowledge, although there was little attempt to deal with the more implicit aspect of their work, the practice of coaching itself, because of the assumption that such craft 'know-how' could only be achieved through experience.

[6] Berman, Down and Hill, 2002
[7] Day, 2012a; 2012b; Day and Carpenter, 2015
[8] Bryant, 2005

Coaches, both amateur and professional, continued to regard themselves as practical men whose experiential knowledge gave them the ability to control diet and develop wind, apply psychological and massaging techniques, prepare stimulants and medical treatments, identify talent, and individualise training programmes.[9] F.A.M. Webster observed in *The Science of Athletics* (1936) that 'Athletic psychology is a big subject, but it is in this department of his craft that the coach does, or does not, establish his claim to greatness' and British coaching texts from the 1920s and 1930s highlighted the need for psychological preparation. Athletes should train mentally as well as physically since self-confidence based on knowledge of one's abilities, carefully planned races, quick decision and skilful tactics, and avoidance of worry were all valuable assets.[10] Athletics coaches observed that mental training was producing sounder judgment, greater receptive powers, and quicker intuitions and decisions, as well as cultivating self-discipline and will power or pluck.[11] Mussabini recognised that, ''Nerves' will always get hold of the athlete, no matter how fit he may be'[12] and Amir Bey noted in *The Art of Squash Rackets* (1934) that brooding over bad decisions destroyed 'control and power of concentration'. Players should avoid disturbing influences and accept that nervousness, epitomised by a 'sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach' and dryness in the mouth, was part of the big match environment. Most important of all was '*the will to win* and the power of imposing this will on the opponent…an iron determination to 'go the limit''. Meldrum (1932) observed that oarsmen in training could become 'comatose or jumpy by turns' at which point the coach could be 'more useful as an unofficial psychologist than as a rowing expert' by inducing confidence without irritating the men. There were times when 'A burst of anger with a slack crew could make them sit up and take notice' but this depended on 'the ability of the coach to size up the personal factor in the situation'. Meldrum also addressed the question of nerves in that 'Some men…are much better in practice than in races, and vice versa. What nerves the one, unnerves the other' and emphasised that 'these characteristics are not easy to detect, unless one has an intimate knowledge of the man'.

Bricoleurs extraordinaire

The sources of knowledge for these coaches were varied and often dependant both on the type of sport they were engaged in and on traditional attitudes towards professionalism and amateurism, particularly in team games. Cricket had a long tradition of coaches drawn from the ranks of professional players. George Hirst, one of England's most famous bowlers, joined Eton in 1920 to coach pupils and gave 'careful advice, wise with the experience of many years'. Rugby, on the other hand, had its suspicions. In 1920, one England international player reported that there was a complete absence of preliminary training and coaching of the team before a representative game. Arguments of favour of it had been met by contentions that such a thing

[9] Nelson, 1924
[10] Lowe, 1929
[11] Lowe and Porritt, 1929
[12] Mussabini, 1924

was contrary to the 'spirit and principles of the Rugby game' and that 'training a team of gladiators' would find disfavour. Association football was slow in adopting coaching and the *Daily Mail* argued in 1920 that football was suffering from a failure to recognise the need for expert coaching, even though every league club had a man nearing the end of his career who was capable of coaching. Coaching continued to meet resistance throughout the professional game, although the FA ran a course for coaches in 1938 that included psychology, diet, sleep, training and tactics.

Herbert Chapman

Experienced football coaches relied on traditional sources of information, however. In the 1920s, Arsenal club manager Herbert Chapman changed the way his teams approached games and brought his own playing experience to bear on the game, changing the function of every outfield position and encouraging his teams to act as a single, efficient organic unit. This carefully planned, scientific method of winning matches was a culmination of Chapman's theory and practice during twenty years in football management and his methods were based on thinking about the game. The club's trainer, Tom Whittaker described him as a '25 hour a day manager' and Eddie Hapgood explained that Chapman 'loved to sit up to the early hours with Whittaker...arguing tactics, angles, theories.' Charles Buchan believed that the secret of Chapman's greatness was that he 'would always listen to other people and take advantage of their ideas if he thought they would improve the team in any way.' A key part of his tactical nuance was the organic and pragmatic marriage of his theories to the individual abilities of the players. Chapman's would utilise any method, regardless of its origin, to effect the betterment of his teams. He experimented, but he did not do so blindly, for he possessed the vision and adaptability to incorporate innovations into his grand design. Chapman always borrowed ideas if he considered them worthy and he backed his belief in the importance of learning from the continentals by taking his teams abroad.

Frank Buckley

Like Chapman, Buckley gained a reputation as a pioneer of modem training methods. Soon after his appointment at Blackpool in 1923, it was reported that a 'pleasing feature of the training ... is that the manager dons the jersey and joins the boys giving them advice and practical demonstration of what to do and how to do it'. Buckley also held practice games on Friday afternoons aimed at developing a better understanding between the players. Later, at Wolves, he introduced mechanical innovations, such as a rowing machine, to supplement training sessions and had a machine purpose-built that fired out footballs at different angles for players to control. A room under a stand was fitted with rubber walls at which players kicked a ball that would then return at unpredictable angles with the aim of improving their ball control. He also encouraged players to go ballroom dancing to improve their balance and movement, and on occasions, he insisted on players dancing with each other in training. Buckley was very keen that all players, including goalkeepers, should be able to kick proficiently with both feet and he wanted his players to be versatile so he would play them in many different positions. One of Buckley's innovations was to inject Wolves players

with monkey gland extracts in 1935. At Blackpool, he had handed out pep pills to players before a cup-tie in the mid-1920s.

The Track and Field Coach

Resistance to the use of professional coaches in British athletics during the first half of the twentieth century has been well documented and an ongoing preference for amateur coaching from one's peers was clearly evident before the Berlin Olympics when several amateur coaches were appointed to the 1935 Loughborough summer school for athletics (see Table 1). Their amateurism was reflected in their coaching advice. For D.G.A. Lowe athletic training simply meant the attainment of perfect health and the acquisition of style, speed and technique.[13] Professional coaches tended to push the boundaries more than their amateur counterparts but, while training had become more scientific and trainers had more theoretical knowledge than their predecessors, one commentator noted that the 'best trainers of fifty years ago were probably as successful by rule of thumb as the semi-scientific coaches of today'. Major advances had been made in field events but most of this development had been 'empirical' and somewhat 'accidental'.[14]

Franz Stampfl

Professional coach Franz Stampfl claimed to have put science into British sport in 1938 by initiating biological and physiological approaches to running and mechanics to throwing. Although a highly debatable claim, Stampfl, who had no formal coaching qualifications, was an elegant, charismatic, and inspirational freelance athletics coach who coached at Oxford University and ran evening training sessions in Chelsea, charging a shilling for anyone who turned up. Chris Brasher believed that Stampfl's power as a coach derived from his tough experiences of life and Chris Chataway said he 'had this fantastic ability to inspire. He could touch what we were doing with magic' and he had the knack of making training interesting. Stampfl believed that to coach properly he had to get under the skin and into the personality of each athlete. 'The important thing is that the coach should be willing to give of his experience whenever it's required.' But be as unobtrusive as possible and never force his opinion upon the athlete. Confidence was the most important quality in the coach-athlete relationship and without it little could be achieved. Coaching was more than a job. 'It is a vocation, which one follows from the same sort of compulsion as drives some to write, some to paint, some to build bridges'. He defined the coach's role as, 'Guide, philosopher and friend, counsellor and confessor, a prop at times of mental tension, a coach's job is big enough for any man,' and he wrote, 'when all the shouting is over, when the senior partner in the firm has broken the record, made the headlines and joined the immortals, the junior partner's reward comes from the satisfaction of a job well done. Who could ask for more?.[15]

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[13] *Manchester Guardian*, May 24, 1929
[14] *Manchester Guardian*, September 4, 1935
[15] Bryant, 2005

The Rowing Coach

While rowing had a long tradition of coaching it would be wrong to assume that there was ever only one coaching method. For example, the 1939 Oxford boat race crew was worked hard and fully tested in in all conditions while the eventual victors Cambridge had been brought along more gently and never been pushed, their coach arguing that they should only expend their greatest effort in the race itself.[16]

Steve Fairbairn

One of the most unorthodox coaches in the Inter-War period was Steve Fairbairn. In *Some Secrets of Successful Rowing* in 1930 Fairbairn outlined the differences between his approach and the orthodoxy of rowing and emphasised 'concentrating on working the oar, and natural body action'. Orthodox crews had the appearance of being drilled, aspiring to uniformity in the boat at all stages, whereas Fairbairn crews were taught that perfect togetherness of bladework was the only uniformity that mattered. They were taught to think about rowing all the time they were doing it, to concentrate on keeping the balance and making the blade effective, and to allow their bodies to behave in a natural and comfortable way. By concentrating solely on working the oar, the body movements were left to the subconscious which, with training, would take care of them, just as in learning to walk or run. Fairbairn's method was learned from pulling boats on the Yarra in Australia and the Cam in England, from listening and talking to oarsmen on both sides of the world, and from watching people moving boats. As a young man, he was an active sportsman in other fields, a good cricketer, footballer, tennis player, billiards player and dancer, all of which and more contributed to his method of natural rowing. Steve's understanding of the psychological side of coaching and his reliance on allowing the subconscious mind to solve problems was years ahead of his contemporaries. Rowing for Fairbairn was a strict discipline and he demanded plenty of hard work and fitness of body and mind. For him, rowing was thought and discussion and he always made allowances for an individual's physical limitations.[17]

The Swimming Coach

Inter-War swimming coaches agreed that training should be a process of 'building up', rather than one of 'continuous exhaustion', and that effective training could not be accelerated. Work should never be pushed to fatigue since training too hard might cause 'burn out', at which point a swimmer should 'let up'. Swimming coaches also argued that a female should wait until she was 14 or 15 years old before attempting serious swimming because the body has begun to finish its rapid growth, advised swimmers to exercise a great deal but only in swimming because other athletic exercises developed entirely different muscles and interfered seriously with swimming form, and believed that a carefully trained swimmer 'should be able to maintain

[16] *Manchester Guardian*, April 1, 1939
[17] Dodd, 1992

top-notch form for ten years'.[18] Important developments in stroke techniques, however, were often driven by innovative individuals.

Bill Howcroft

By the 1920s, William ('Bill') Howcroft was effectively the leading swimming coach in Britain and he visited the US to study their techniques and acquire a 'thorough knowledge of the American crawl', adoption of which had been particularly slow in Britain, subsequently passing on this knowledge to other British coaches. As amateur coach of Garston Swimming Club, Howcroft produced four of the six female members of the 1920 British Olympic team and after his appointment as 1924 Olympic Coach, he toured swimming centres throughout England to coordinate and systematise the work of the best English coaches as well as advocating the use of the front crawl stroke. In July 1924, Howcroft resigned all his amateur positions 'on account of the fact that he was joining the professional ranks at the conclusion of the Olympic Games'. In 1930, he was still arguing that Britain had failed to keep up with the latest developments in instruction methods, stroke analysis, and progressive training, leaving it as the 'only country where the governing associations have attempted to control instructional methods by textbooks and certificate exams.' He criticised existing ASA publications and contributed his own texts, *Swimming for Speed: The Crawl Stroke (1935)*, *Swimming for Schoolboys (1936)*, and *Crawl-Stroke Swimming (1929)*. Howcroft continued to be active throughout the 1930s, not least through his writings for the *Morning Post*, in which he argued for 'the appointment of a national organiser. Uniquely, he coached both major universities simultaneously following agreement between Cambridge and Oxford in 1930. British Olympian Joyce Cooper later described 'Old Howcroft' as the best coach in the world at that time. Unfortunately, 'he went a bit bats towards his end but all during my career he was wonderful. I was supple but not strong…He gave me my strength. I owed everything to him'.

Conclusion

Drawing primarily on their own experiences and the mores of oral tradition, Inter-War coaches accumulated a range of techniques and sport-specific practices related to both skill development and physical preparation while also experimenting in applying emerging knowledge, in the process of which they intuitively accepted or rejected appropriate material, thereby adding to a traditional body of knowledge. In contrast to 'professional knowledge', this craft knowledge was 'knowing in action'; a feel for coaching developed with and from experience which was embedded within informal structures created by coaches engaging in a process of collective learning. Using Inter-War examples, this paper highlights stability in traditional coaching methods based on experiential knowledge and that, despite societal and economic developments, together with scientific and technological advances, coaching practices remain distinguished by continuity rather than novelty. While elite coaches still fundamentally operate by continuing to rely on their experience and their

[18] Anderson, 1931

'coach's eye', however, the environment within which they operate would be unrecognizable to Inter War coaches. Given their reputations for adopting a 'scientific' approach and drawing on as many sources as possible, they would probably appreciate advances in sport science, although they may have some concerns about losing control of the coaching process and question whether they really needed to engage specialists, given their own expertise.

Whether they would be equally impressed by the drive for standardization through professionalization and the centrality of formal certification can only be speculated. The research evidence suggests that great coaches have continued to rely on an inquiring mind, intuition, tacit knowledge, and experience and reflection rather than on sport science or coach certification. It is somewhat strange that we have failed to absorb the lessons of the past, together with the contemporary research that continues to reinforce Dewey's ideas about experience and reflection, by continuing to assume that coaches need to be formally educated. Cushion, Armour and Jones (2003) recognised that experience plays a central role in impacting upon coaches' practice but argued that the preparation of the practitioner cannot be left to experience alone while Evans and Light (2007) take it as a given that contemporary coaches can no longer rely solely on 'learning the trade' through experience. Part of the problem may well be the widespread assumption that everyone can be taught to be a coach. If we interrogate that perspective, we might conclude that just as not everyone can become a plumber, doctor, joiner or teacher then not everyone can become a coach. People with relevant skills and experiences, individuals who have a creative and fertile mind and who are prepared to reflect systematically, might actually be the only viable candidates as coaches. So perhaps we should rethink both the ways in which potential coaches are selected and the way that they are helped to mature. If experiential learning is critical, and it seems that it is, perhaps it is time for a proper apprenticeship programme based on the notion of coaching as a craft not as a science. The problem for such initiatives, however, is that traditional coaching communities and coaching leaders emerged organically from the activity, from below rather than being structured from above. As Dewey implied, coaches who learn their trade actively, rather than as a passive recipient of an instructional process, build a deeper understanding of the world in which they use their skills and through the continual development and use of those skills they experience learning as a lifelong process.